

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHEG #2428 3311455
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 261455Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0946
INFO RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L CAIRO 002428

SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR PASCUAL; DRL/IRF FOR COFSKY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/27/2018
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [SOCI](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: SECTARIAN ATTACK ON CHURCH NEAR CAIRO

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs
William R. Stewart for Reason 1.4(d).

1.(SBU) On November 24, hundreds of Muslims armed with rocks and bottles reportedly attacked a Coptic Christian Church - the Church of the Virgin Mary - in the Matareya area of Cairo. The mob apparently was unable to enter the church but fought in the streets with Copts defending it. Video recordings of the incident show police attempting to intervene but being driven back by the mob. After reinforcements arrived, police used tear gas to control the violence and made 38 arrests. Thirty detainees were quickly released, reportedly because they were minors; five Muslims and three Christians remain in custody. The attack has been widely and prominently reported in the local press. On November 25, the government information service announced that Pope Shenouda III, the leader of the Coptic Church, had suspended activities at the Church of the Virgin Mary.

2.(SBU) According to contacts, the area has been tense since the Coptic Church acquired an unused factory building in 2007 and began converting it into a church and community center. Although the Coptic Church did not obtain required GoE approval to establish the church, it proceeded with the project after initiating the approval process, confident it would eventually receive a license. After church construction began, Muslim neighbors began building a mosque across the street from the factory/church, apparently in the belief that the GoE would refuse to license the church if there was a mosque nearby. The plan was thwarted when Coptic officials recently consecrated the Church of the Virgin Mary.

3.(SBU) The November 24 incident began during evening prayers at the neighboring mosque. According to media reports, local Muslim leaders, identified by the Internet news service Islam Online as Muslim Brotherhood (MB) members, urged worshippers at the mosque to attack the church, where services were underway. On November 25, the MB denied that it instigated the attack and said it would never "endorse sectarian conflicts." In its statement, issued by the Deputy Supreme Guide of the MB, the MB also said that it considered Copts "first class citizens" entitled to the "utmost freedom" including the "right to renovate Coptic buildings."

4.(C) Comment: In recent months, Egypt has experienced a growing number of incidents of violence between Muslims and Copts. It is unclear what is driving this, although the GoE has been noticeably silent, declining to comment or assign blame publicly. We find it noteworthy that the MB, perhaps unhappy with the alleged links the media drew between it and the violence in Matereya, is now more vocal than the GoE in condemning sectarian violence. Coptic leaders have also noted the lack of an effective GoE response to recent sectarian incidents. Yousef Sidhom, a Coptic intellectual and editor of Al Watany newspaper, recently complained to us that the GoE, rather than enforcing Egypt's laws, seeks to "reconcile" the parties to sectarian disputes, even when it is clear where responsibility lies. Sidhom said that if the

GoE would punish those responsible, it would have an immediate impact. According to Sidhom, the GoE is reluctant to do so because it fears it will appear "un-Islamic," perhaps provoking an extremist backlash.

SCOBey